

Does Philosophy Work? Published in Barnard's Echoes

While trying to zone out to my iPod on the subway some months ago, I noticed an ad about philosophy. It caught my attention because it displays two different drawings of the same little fish. The first one shows the fish in a tiny fishbowl, seemingly contemplating life. The second drawing shows the fish jumping up jauntily from swimming in the ocean with a big smile on its face. Obviously, the fish had an 'a-ha-moment.' He must have found the meaning of his life. The script on top reads: "Philosophy Works." Below is what the fishbowl-fish must be thinking: "Who am I? What am I doing here?"

Suggested is, of course, that fish in drawing #2 found the answer to these questions and has now become a chipper ocean-fish who is not limited by narrow-minded fish-bowl-thinking anymore.

Since I am taking my first philosophy class at Columbia this semester (Plato, anyone?) I could not help but grin when I saw this ad again this morning. After all, I thought, this is something thousands of New Yorkers look at every day. The ad is for a school, dedicated entirely to philosophy, the study of which my German Mom considers to be yet another branch of future unemployment. To her, it is somewhere between struggling artist-existence and what she calls 'the study of me, myself and I and then some more me.' Is philosophy slowly shedding its image of being useless and existing solely for crazed and egomaniacal people? What is this need that slowly surfaces for values and meaning? How is it that people have become very interested again in Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, etc.? Does it have to do with a state of fear lingering in the air since 9-11? Is it the war in Iraq? Are we trying to come to terms with other people's religions, philosophies and general 'otherness?' Is it because we feel politically powerless? Or are we just tired of fishbowl-thinking?

To Plato and Aristotle nothing was more important than to understand the essence of things like the good, justice, and virtue. Values have become important to us again as we see the world decline. The worse our surroundings become, the more we want to conceive of why we are losing our religion.

Some things have definitely changed. Ten years ago, the subways in New York displayed the Guess-campaign and ads for hair products. The gap that 'Generation Me' of the 1980's and 'Generation X' of the 90's left might be filled by living what Socrates called an "examined life". Perhaps philosophy and is not only becoming popular again, but also necessary. Even though the answer "I am a philosopher" to the much loved New York question of "So what do you do?" would most likely still buy one a one-way-ticket to Bellevue, the fact of a philosophy school having initially been founded by parents for their children is worthy of reflection. After all, philosophy is and always has been about bringing about change.

Having not cared much for philosophy at all in the past, I used to think that it was imperative for a feisty teenager whose father was a professor for philosophy with main focus on ethics. In the last two years, however, there was a moment that made me think that, maybe, there is something missing from the hectic chore-to-bill-to-appointment-ridden New York way of life. Asking these questions is important, because they can change lives. And looking at how many people take philosophy classes these days makes me think that maybe our collective unconscious can do what Immanuel Kant. And who doesn't want to be the fish in drawing #2?